

C. S. LEWIS AND GOD'S SURPRISES

Charles Colson

OR . . . How the writings of a humble Oxford professor helped to inspire a prison ministry that spans the globe

Chuck Colson is a native of Boston who holds degrees from Brown University and George Washington University. From 1969 to 1973 he served as Special Counsel to U.S. President Richard Nixon. After spending nine months in a Federal prison stemming from charges related to the Watergate affair, Colson was released and in 1976 founded Prison Fellowship, an organization for ministering to prisoners, their families, and the victims of crime. Prison Fellowship, or "PF" as it is sometimes abbreviated, now has chapters throughout the United States and around the globe. Colson remains active in prison ministry, lobbying for legal reform through PF's Justice Fellowship branch, and in his writing. Besides his regular columns for Prison Fellowship's monthly newsletter, he also writes for Christianity Today and has authored several books, including Born Again, Life Sentence, Kingdoms in Conflict, and Loving God. This piece first appeared in the June 1998 issue of Jubilee Extra, copyright of Prison Fellowship Ministries, and is reprinted here with permission.

In 1998, I celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of my conversion to Christ. And what was it that turned around a hardened ex-marine, White House hatchet man? The loving witness of a friend and the writings of a tweedy, pipe-smoking scholar of medieval literature named C. S. Lewis. Because this year was also the celebration of the hundredth anniversary of Lewis's birth, I found myself reflecting on the manifold ways his writings had shaped my life and ministry.

It all began for me one evening in the home of Tom Phillips, a business colleague. Tom read a passage on pride from Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. Though I didn't let on, it was as if Lewis had written the words just for me. They pierced my heart, exposing my sin. That night, sitting in my car in Tom's driveway, I broke down in a flood of tears.

But I distrust emotional responses, and it was only by reading the entire book a week later that my intellect caught up with my spiritual experience. In a single page, Lewis demolished my complacent rationalization of Christ's demands, the notion that Jesus was merely a great moral teacher. Given the claims Jesus made to divinity, a moral teacher is precisely what he could not be, Lewis argued: Either he was indeed the Son of God or he was a scoundrel and a liar. Faced with this clear choice, I realized that the presence I confronted that night in the driveway was truly the living God.

But Lewis's influence did not stop there. His writings came to have a decisive influence on my entire ministry. Prison Fellowship's approach is indebted to Lewis's essay "The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment," which skewers the modern theory of criminal justice defining punishment in terms of deterrence or rehabilitation.¹ Such an approach is thoroughly pragmatic, Lewis points out: It presumes that criminal justice is about achieving sociological goals. And in the process it reduces the criminal to an object to be manipulated to reach those goals. Given such a dehumanizing view of the person, no wonder the theory invariably fails.

By contrast, a biblical understanding is thoroughly moral: Punishment is about justice. The criminal is accorded the dignity

of being a moral agent, whose actions *deserve* either praise or punishment. This is the moral perspective undergirding Prison Fellowship's ministry.

Elsewhere, in my speaking and writing, I continue to be shaped by Lewis's writings. His *Miracles* (1947) was uncannily prophetic in foreseeing the emerging naturalistic philosophy, which has stripped the transcendent dimension from every area of thought, whether science or law or ethics—a theme I raise often in my speeches and radio commentaries. His *The Abolition of Man* (1943) dissected the moral relativism that has devastated modern education, from the college campus to the elementary classroom. In a chapter titled “Men Without Chests,” Lewis puts his finger on the fatal flaw in all secular ethical systems: They address how to know what's right, but they cannot shape the will to *do* what's right. Finally, Lewis's eloquent arguments in *Mere Christianity* on why Christians must stand together to defend the faith have motivated my work to bring evangelicals and Catholics together.

It strikes me as a delicious irony that this quiet Oxford and Cambridge don should exert such a formative influence on me and many others today. He was a humble man, who probably never imagined his work would have such an impact. I picture him in his study, faded volumes of medieval literature stacked high on the shelves, thoughtfully puffing on his pipe (which is now one of my prized possessions, given to me by the executor of Lewis's estate).

Never would he have dreamed that his writings would inspire a prison ministry that spans the globe, along with a speaking and radio ministry reaching much of the church.

There is a lesson here for you and me, as each of us shoulders the task God has given us. Lewis exhorted Christians to get ready for the Second Coming simply by staying at our post, faithfully doing whatever we are called to do. And when we do, God will often use our efforts in ways we cannot imagine.

The God of whom C. S. Lewis wrote so movingly is still sovereign, and still surprises us with the way he works through humble human instruments—if only we are faithful.